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U.S. DEA creates specialized prescription drug investigative unit based in Cleveland

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[Comment](#)By [James F. McCarty, The Plain Dealer](#)**PD file photo** U.S. Attorney Steven Dettelbach

A previous version of this story misspelled the name of U.S. Drug Czar Gil Kerlikowske.

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration will create a Cleveland-based, 12-member investigative unit dedicated to prescription drug cases, U.S. Attorney Steven Dettelbach announced Monday.

The DEA Tactical Diversion Squad will consist of four agents from the DEA and one from the FBI, plus officers from the Akron and Lorain police departments, the Cuyahoga, Lorain and Summit county sheriff's departments, the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Identification and

Investigation, and the Lake County Narcotics Agency. Their area will be most of northern Ohio.

Dettelbach said he worked with the DEA to establish the specialized unit in response to the growing severity of prescription drug abuse in Northeast Ohio.

"Prescription drug abuse is an epidemic in Ohio, and we are working with all our law enforcement colleagues and partners in the medical community to address the problem,"

Dettelbach said at an all-day summit on prescription drug abuse hosted by the U.S. Attorney's Office and the Cleveland Clinic.

In recent months, the U.S. Attorney's office in Cleveland has prosecuted the largest "pill mill" trafficking case in the country, Dettelbach said.

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His office also struck a \$50 million settlement with Kentucky-based Omnicare Inc. to resolve complaints that the company's pharmacies dispensed painkillers to nursing home and other long-term care patients across the country without proper prescriptions. The deal marked the second-largest civil settlement in the history of the Controlled Substances Act, which regulates the prescribing and dispensing of narcotics.

"This problem is both a health care problem and a law enforcement problem," Dettelbach told the roomful of several hundred lawyers, police officers and doctors. "But we cannot arrest our way out of this problem."



The conference featured an address by the nation's Drug Czar, Gil Kerlikowske, head of the Office of National Drug Control Policy.

"Ohio is one of the office's biggest supporters in the nation in this fight against prescription drug abuse," Kerlikowske said.

Kurlikowske said the prescription drug epidemic caught him by surprise as he was preparing for Senate confirmation hearings following his appointment to the cabinet-level position by President Barack Obama in 2009.

Now, he said, he knows the statistics by heart: prescription drug overdoses have become the leading cause of accidental deaths in the country, surpassing automobile accidents and deaths by gunshot, and more than the combined number of deaths from cocaine and heroin overdoses.

In Ohio, from 1999 to 2010, prescription drug overdose deaths increased 372 percent, he said.

"It's the fastest-growing drug problem in the United States," Kerlikowske said. "Our success will come from coordination and collaboration at the federal, state and local levels."

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